

prescription drug prices still eat away at people's budgets. In the American Rescue Plan, we strengthen the Affordable Care Act to make ACA insurance plans more affordable. Customers are saving an average of 40 percent on their monthly premiums on ACA plans because of the American Rescue Plan we passed in March. We will make sure those cost savings continue so Americans can save on their coverage.

We will make it more affordable for seniors and Americans with disabilities to get the care they need at home from a workforce that actually makes a living wage.

I was with a number of home care workers in Cleveland the other day. These are people who take care of people we love. They take care of aging parents; they take care of workers injured on the job; they take care of families. They make \$11, \$12, \$13 an hour. Some of them have been doing this for 20 years, and they still don't make a living wage.

As I said earlier, as the lady from West Virginia said, the words "working" and "poor" should not be in the same sentence.

We know how powerful the Big Pharma lobbyists are. For years—decades—many of us have fought to allow Medicare to negotiate prices with drug companies, just like private insurance companies and the Veterans Health Administration do.

I used to, as a Member of Congress, take busloads to Canada—about 3 hours away—so that seniors could buy prescription drugs in Windsor, Ontario, because it cost half as much. It was the same brand name, same dosage, same packaging, but the Canadian Government negotiates prices directly with the drug companies. The American Government doesn't.

Why?

Well, you know why. Look down the hall at MITCH MCCONNELL's office, who has been the Republican leader of the Senate for many years. Look at the lobbyists from the drug companies who line up outside his office. He is always telling people: No, we are going to do whatever the drug companies want. We know that the entire minority, the entire Republican Party here, is in the pockets of the drug companies. We know that.

The problem is we have got to get all 50 Democrats to stand up and say: No. We are going to negotiate. We are going to stand with Medicare beneficiaries. We are going to stand with people who need prescription drugs—of all ages—and we are going to negotiate on their behalf directly with the drug companies, cutting the price.

We do that with the VA. Whether it is in Reno or in Cleveland, whether it is in Las Vegas or in Columbus, the VA pays significantly less for prescription drugs than do the rest of us.

In this bill, we are finally standing up to the drug companies. We are going to start bringing down seniors' prescription costs. For the first time ever,

we are empowering Medicaid to negotiate directly. It is going to make a difference for seniors—a huge difference for seniors—who are living on fixed incomes.

Of course, we know, for young families, they face, generally, different costs. The children of working parents often get their health insurance through Medicaid or through CHIP. Right now, if a mom takes on an extra shift, or if a dad takes a bonus for a job well done, that tiny change—that small change in their monthly income—could cause their kids to lose their insurance for the month.

What kind of policy is that?

So Dad works really hard and is really good at his job, so he gets a raise; and Mom wants to work an extra shift, so she brings a little more money home.

And then we take the benefit away?

So we are saying to them: Yes, we believe in working hard, and we believe in family values, but if you work too hard and you make too much money, we are going to take away the benefit.

That kind of policy is just stupid. That is why we are including my legislation that will keep kids insured all year. It means parents won't have to worry they will get hit with a huge medical bill if their child gets sick in the same month they work some extra hours.

Of course, the biggest cost for so many families is childcare. The Build Back Better plan will ensure that middle-class families pay no more than 7 percent of their income on childcare. What a relief that is going to be.

Again, the point of this bill is job creation. Build Back Better is job creation; it is the biggest tax cut in American history for families with children; and it is to bring costs down.

One of the most oppressive, most burdensome, most difficult costs for families is childcare. For a family with one toddler and two parents who earn \$50,000 a year, our plan will save them \$5,000—\$5,000—in childcare costs. Some families will save up to \$6,500.

Think of what that means. On top of this, as I said, is the biggest tax cut for working families in American history.

In my State and in Nevada—the Presiding Officer's State that Senator CORTEZ MASTO represents—it is not much different from the rest of the country.

More than 90 percent of the families in Ohio who have children under 18 will, at a minimum, get a \$3,000 tax cut—at a minimum, \$3,000 a year. That is a real tax cut. That is not like a deduction. Those are real dollars in their pockets. Think about that: more than 90 percent of families in this country.

In my State, it is families with 2.2 million children. That many kids, that many families, will get at least a \$3,000 tax cut. If they have three children, they will get an \$8,000 or a \$9,000 tax cut in the course of a year, and that is one of the most important parts of this bill. It will help them keep up with the

costs of diapers and childcare and clothes and all of the other expenses.

One of the joys of this job is going online where we have a website. We have a "tell your story" about the biggest tax cut in American history for working families and what that means to you.

One woman wrote in and said: For the first time in my life, I can send my son to summer camp for a week.

A man wrote in from Cincinnati and said: For the first time ever, I can, finally, now afford fast-pitch softball equipment for my daughter.

Others have said: You know, now I can put aside \$100 a month for my child to go to Eastern Gateway or to Stark State or to North Central Ohio's technical or community college.

Others have said—and this is the one we hear the most. You have heard so many families talk about the last week of the month. For the people around here who make more money than this, you don't think of it much; but in the last week of the month, so many families face the anxiety of: How do I put together enough money to pay my rent this month?

Well, the child tax credit has relieved that anxiety for millions of families because they get that \$300 or that \$250 or, maybe, with two children, they get \$600 on the 15th of the month that can ease the making of their rent that time.

But it comes down to: Whose side are you on?

It comes down to MITCH MCCONNELL and the lobbyists in his office and the politicians who always do his bidding and pass their tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporations that outsource jobs, and you know that. It was 4 years ago that there was the biggest tax cut, and 70 percent of that tax cut went to the wealthiest 1 percent of people. Contrast that with our tax cut whereby 90 percent of Ohio families will get at least a \$3,000-a-year tax cut.

It is pretty simple. If you want tax cuts for billionaires, then vote against this bill. If you want tax cuts for working families, that is why you will support Build Back Better.

Do you want tax cuts for drug companies, or do you want to bring down prescription drug prices? Do you want tax cuts for big banks that won't give your family a mortgage, or do you want to bring down the cost of housing?

When you love this country, you fight for the people who make it work. You fight for their jobs. You fight for their higher wages. You fight to bring down their cost of living. That is what we are doing.

I yield the floor to my colleague from Ohio.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

AFGHANISTAN

MR. PORTMAN. Madam President, I rise today to speak about an issue that is very concerning and has to do with our national security and our homeland security.

I am the ranking Republican on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, and in my role on that committee, we have done a lot of investigation into what happened in Afghanistan in terms of the rushed and chaotic evacuation.

Unfortunately, I am here today to talk about a new threat to our homeland security due to the Biden administration's failure to adequately vet the Afghan evacuees who came through this chaotic process.

Like many of my colleagues here on the floor—I think I can speak for them—I support the resettlement of those who stood with us and our allies who stood with us in battle, in particular, over the past two decades in Afghanistan. That is important. Yet everybody recognizes that the rushed nature of the evacuation resulted in some of the wrong people coming out and many of the right people not being rescued from Afghanistan.

Too many people were left behind. There is no question about that. There were American citizens left behind and permanent residents left behind, and many of the Afghans who had worked with us and with our allies as interpreters, as drivers, who worked at NATO, or who worked at the United Nations were left behind—so were a lot of people who were actually in the process of getting what is called a special immigrant visa, an SIV. Those would be our allies in Afghanistan, the Afghans who, again, stood with us as drivers or interpreters and so on.

Getting information has been really hard from the administration, and it is very frustrating to me, also to every one of my colleagues, and to the American people. In fact, in the recent continuing resolution, we actually got language included that requires, by November 30, for the administration to tell us exactly how many SIV holders—special immigrant visa holders—were left behind, how many citizens were left behind, and how many people, who were employees of a U.S.- or a U.N.-funded partner organization, were left behind. We still haven't heard, so we don't know the information.

What we do know is that very few of the evacuees who came out were either American citizens, permanent residents, SIV applicants, or, certainly, SIV holders. In fact, we know from the Defense Department that there were only about 700 holders of SIVs who came out of the, roughly, 78,000 people who were evacuated to the United States.

Let me say that again. Only about 700 of those people were SIV holders. That is out of thousands of SIV holders and applicants who were left behind in Afghanistan. There were 78,000 people who got out, but the vast majority of them—again, I am not represented by any of these groups that we would have thought would have been brought out.

It is also clear that, in the rush and chaos at the Karzai Airport, the majority of those who were evacuated were

neither American citizens, green card holders, Afghans, nor special immigrant visa holders, as we talked about.

So, just as we have an obligation to help resettle those who stood with us, we also have an obligation to ensure that our communities are safe and that we know who is being released into our communities. This means not releasing people who have not been fully vetted. We want to know who these people are. They might possibly have records—criminal records. They might have terrorist affiliations. That is why you need to do the proper screening and vetting.

Secretary Mayorkas testified in September before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, where, again, I serve as the top Republican. The testimony was about the vetting procedures of the Afghan evacuees.

He said: “There is a robust screening and vetting process in addition to expertise both in the transit countries and here domestically.”

“There is a robust screening and vetting process both in the transit countries and here domestically.” I wish that were true, but, unfortunately, it is not.

An unclassified briefing last week with Federal officials from all of the relevant national security Agencies confirmed what our committee staff had already discovered through our in-person oversight of the vetting operations. They toured operations here in the States. They also toured operations overseas at what are called the lily pads, where people are brought from Afghanistan to a foreign destination and then brought to the United States.

What they found and what was confirmed at that meeting last week is that there is not a robust screening and vetting process for all Afghan evacuees. It is true that there is a screening process. This is what it consists of: providing fingerprints and your name and, many times, a facial image—so your face, your fingerprints, and your name—to a Federal database at the overseas lily pads. But unless the evacuee was a known terrorist, a terrorist affiliate, or a criminal whose name, face, or fingerprints were stored on the system, there was no vetting; there were no interviews—nothing else—for Afghans who have been paroled into the United States.

Now, here is the problem with that: Our database is not complete. Despite repeated attempts to obtain the information, by the way, we don't know how many Afghans were successful in getting past the database screening I just talked about, but we are told by those on the ground that it was the vast majority.

In other words, very few people were picked up through this database we talked about, which is DHS, the State Department, and intelligence services. Relying on hits on this database—this biographic and biometric database that we have—is not adequate because the

databases do not have information on all Afghans. Certainly, they don't have information on all Afghans who may be terrorists or who may be terrorist sympathizers or who may have criminal records. We didn't have a database like that, so we are ping-pong against a database that was incomplete.

Those Afghans with no information in the systems at all are not a known risk—I acknowledge that; and most of them are good people—but this does not mean that admitting them with no additional scrutiny is an acceptable risk.

The best way to know something more about someone who is in the process of being paroled into the United States is through intensive in-person interviews. That is how it is traditionally done.

Interviews allow Federal officials to dig deeper into an evacuee's background and learn more about their affiliations, as well as their beliefs about the United States and the Western world.

In fact, we learned in the 9/11 Commission report effective in-person interviews by U.S. government officials prevented at least three individuals who were intending to join the 2001 terror plot and attacks—it kept them from entering the country and contributing to that tragedy on September 11.

One of the major lessons from the 9/11 Commission was that if the U.S. Government had conducted face-to-face interviews of all 19 of the 9/11 hijackers, the attacks may have been prevented altogether.

How soon we forget.

The requirement of an in-person interview is a standard process that normally applies to all refugees. It would have been appropriate to consider most of these Afghans to be refugees, who would have been subject to persecution from the Taliban due to their status as a person who worked with us or because they were part of a vulnerable group, including a lot of women and girls.

Interestingly, the Biden administration wants to treat the Afghan evacuees as refugees when it comes to their benefits, but they are not following the necessary refugee security procedures to vet those individuals.

Our oversight identified many other issues and concerns with the vetting process. For example, if an Afghan did have identification, such as an Afghan national ID card or passport, the screening process did not include validation of the documents beyond a visual inspection; no follow-up.

The officials working at the military bases in Europe said they did not have any specific training or expertise in identifying a fraudulent Afghan ID card.

So, again, our folks went over to these foreign locations, these so-called lily pads, talked to the people who were doing this screening process, and said: When you get an Afghan ID card, what do you do?

They said: We don't have the expertise to identify a fraudulent Afghan ID card, so we assume that it is accurate, and their identities are logged into a national security database, a U.S. national security base—database, in some cases, of course, then, based on what could be a fake ID.

If the evacuees did not have any identification documents, which apparently was the case with a substantial number, no ID at all, Federal officials simply logged them into our databases based on what they said was their name and their date of birth. So they created a national security database from what these individuals volunteered.

We are told it is not unusual for Afghans not to know their actual birth date. It is just not always part of the culture to record or have that information. That is understood. But this has resulted in a number of the databases, including information about birth dates, being January 1 of a particular year. So there are some people logged in to say January 1, 1990.

The problem here is that our systems rely heavily on an individual's birthday as a key biographic identifier.

You get asked your birthday all the time, I am sure, whether it is getting healthcare, whether it is at a security checkpoint.

And now we have entered information into our systems that we cannot rely on to be accurate; in some cases, could be false identities.

Based on our oversight—again, trips to these sites with Democratic staff members, Republican staff members—talking with those coordinating the Afghan resettlement here in the United States, it appears that each side of the ocean—folks overseas and folks here in America—thought the other side was doing more vetting than was actually occurring.

The official overseeing the screening of an evacuee at a lily pad overseas told us he thought the vetting was being done when evacuees arrived on U.S. soil. When asked if he felt the screening and vetting being done at the military bases in Europe were sufficient to be confident in America's security—since evacuees can and have left the bases in the United States—he said they were not.

But that is exactly what is happening.

A senior official at a base in the United States confirmed that there are no in-person vetting interviews at any of the seven domestic military bases that are now housing evacuees, and that all vetting interviews were done overseas at the lily pads. So it is a little bit of one pointing to the other.

Officials also confirmed that when an evacuee arrived in the United States, the only screening that was conducted was the standard Customs screening that all international visitors and tourists go through at the airport.

Specifically, evacuees provided their information, if they had it, at the Customs

booth, and if there were no flags, they were immediately paroled into the United States for 2 years. Customs would check their information against the records created at the lily pads, effectively creating a feedback loop. So information that might not be accurate or might not be fulsome, might not be appropriate is then added to other information and one checked against the other.

Once here, the Afghan evacuees are not detained. According to the administration, more than 2,000 of these individuals have now left the military bases where they are being housed and are freely moving about our communities.

Again, my view is most of these people are good people. Some of them did help us. As I said, it is a relatively small number. Somewhere around 75 percent are not SIV holders or applicants or citizens or permanent residents. But we don't know who a lot of these folks are. And, again, people think that they are at the military bases because that is where they have to be until we do fuller, further vetting. That is not true. There are no interviews being done here, and they are free to walk off the military bases, and a couple thousand have.

The only conditions of parole that must be met prior to leaving the military base is to receive vaccinations for measles and COVID-19, and agreeing to update DHS with any change of address within 10 days. That is it.

I led an amendment with some of my colleagues to the recent continuing resolution to ensure that not all of the Afghan evacuees are automatically eligible for what is called a REAL ID.

If you have been to an airport recently, you know you are going to need a REAL ID to get on a plane. A REAL ID is supposed to be issued only to individuals with a valid Social Security Number; proof of identity, which is shown through a birth certificate; and two proofs of residency, like a bank statement, lease, or utility bill, that show that you permanently live in the United States. There is a process to get a REAL ID.

It was a 9/11 Commission recommendation, by the way, that we have a REAL ID procedure.

But while we U.S. citizens have to abide by all these requirements to get a license or an ID, Congress waived one requirement for Afghan evacuees: the requirement to provide proof of lawful residence.

This undermines the REAL ID system, and it should not happen.

The amendment I offered with colleagues would have required the Afghan evacuees to follow the normal process to require a REAL ID. It would be to apply for asylum and then receive a REAL ID. Until their asylum application is approved, they would be able to fly on an airplane with that asylum application or their work authorization, which many of them have received.

Unfortunately, this body rejected that amendment with a narrow vote.

Due to the reckless policies of the Biden administration, we have the situation where an Afghan evacuee with no presence in our databases, no documents establishing identity, can have a cover identity created by the U.S. Government at, for example, Ramstein Air Base, where we went and talked to individuals, based on a stated name, volunteered, a stated birth date, and then can receive a REAL ID when they come to the United States.

Doesn't seem right to people when I explain that, and it is not, but that is the system.

I have come down here a number of times to talk about what is going on on the southern border. Again, in my role as the ranking Republican on the Homeland Security Committee, we do a lot of work in that area.

Unfortunately, it is getting worse, not better, in terms of number of people coming across, the number of drugs coming across, and the amount of human trafficking.

What is astounding is that, as open as our southern border is under this administration, if an Afghan tried to cross our southern border, they would be interviewed by a Federal law enforcement official.

Under this Afghan resettlement operation, though, the Biden administration has lowered the bar for security even below that of our southern border.

We already know from the administration there are Afghan evacuees who pose dangerous national security threats, who were able to pass the screening process we talked about at the lily pads overseas and to arrive on U.S. soil.

We still don't know how they were apprehended, but we do know from media reporting that there are at least 10 evacuees who have made it past all this screening into the United States prior to the national security concerns being raised, and causing them currently to be detained in Federal facilities as a national security threat. That is 10. We don't know how many more there are.

The lack of appropriate screening and vetting of Afghan evacuees by this administration is reminiscent of a pre-9/11 security mindset.

Remember, we were at war in Afghanistan for 20 years. We know that ISIS-K and al-Qaida are operating in Afghanistan. These dynamics in Afghanistan should be reflected by ensuring that normal national security vetting processes are applied to all evacuees. I don't think that is too much to ask.

I stand ready to work with the administration and all of my colleagues in the Senate, both sides of the aisle, to address and mitigate this vulnerability to U.S. homeland security. I hope it is not too late.

I believe we have got to address the REAL ID eligibility of Afghan evacuees and require in-person vetting prior to distributing any new REAL IDs to those Afghan refugees who have

reached our shores. For future Afghan arrivals, it is clear that the vetting and interview process must be strengthened and enforced. And, again, in talking to the Federal officials on the ground overseas, they would agree.

It is not too much to ask that Afghan refugees be treated the same as all refugees when it comes to security vetting. We can't continue to allow a lack of effective screening of Afghan evacuees to endanger our communities.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BROWN). The senior Senator from Maryland.

(The remarks of Mr. CARDIN pertaining to the introduction of S. 3166 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

Mr. CARDIN. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. OSSOFF. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BROWN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. OSSOFF. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate consider the following nominations en bloc: Calendar Nos. 505 and 506; that the Senate vote on the nominations en bloc without intervening action or debate; that the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that any statements related to the nominations be printed in the RECORD; and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nominations en bloc.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the nominations of Geraldine Richmond, of Oregon, to be Under Secretary for Science, Department of Energy; and M. Camille Calimlim Touton, of Nevada, to be Commissioner of Reclamation, en bloc?

The nominations were confirmed.

#### UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. OSSOFF. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that notwithstanding rule XXII, if applicable, at a time to be determined by the majority leader, in consultation with the Republican leader, the Senate proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 491, Jonathan Kanter, of Maryland, to be an Assistant Attorney General; that there be 10 minutes for debate,

equally divided in the usual form on the nomination; that upon the use or yielding back of time, the Senate proceed to vote, without intervening action or debate, on the nomination; that if the nomination is confirmed, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order on the nomination; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; and that the Senate then resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### LEGISLATIVE SESSION

##### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. OSSOFF. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### CONFIRMATION OF ADRIENNE WOJCIECHOWSKI

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I am pleased that yesterday, the Senate confirmed Adrienne Wojciechowski to be the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations at the U.S. Department of Agriculture—USDA—a role for which is eminently qualified. For more than a decade, Adrienne has been an indispensable staff member in the Senate, dedicated to supporting farmers, growing our rural economies, and tackling climate change and land stewardship challenges. Adrienne has earned deep respect from on both sides of the aisle.

Adrienne first joined my staff in 2007 and quickly became a key member of my legislative team on topics ranging from agriculture to water quality to climate change. Adrienne was immediately involved in 2008 farm bill negotiations and played an integral staff role in negotiating substantial portions of the 2014 and 2018 farm bills.

Over the years, I could always count on Adrienne's persistence, attention to detail, and sound judgement. Adrienne brought these same gifts to her work with USDA partners in Vermont, carefully building trusting relationships that enabled my legislative work to be informed by on-the-ground, State-level delivery of USDA programs.

Most recently, Adrienne has served as a professional staff member on the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, managing Senators' diverse spending priorities in the annual appropriations cycle and negotiating bipartisan final bills.

I have served on the Senate Agriculture Committee since I first came to the Senate. There is an old saying that Vermont without farms would

still be a nice place, but it wouldn't be Vermont. While she is not a native Vermonter herself, it has been a pleasure to see Adrienne form such deep relationships with Vermont's agrarian traditions, our farmers, and our landscape. Whether it was navigating USDA bureaucracy or rebuilding a barn after a fire, farmers and the agriculture community in Vermont knew that a call to my office would get Adrienne on the case.

Although Senate staff work behind the scenes and their contributions can go unheralded, the impact of Adrienne's dedication, her contributions to conservation policy, farm viability, and farmland protection programs can truly be seen on the landscape of Vermont and across the country. On behalf of all Vermonters, I thank Adrienne Wojciechowski for her service to the U.S. Senate and wish her the best of luck as she joins the Biden administration.

#### REMEMBERING NEAL SMITH

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I would like to expand on my tribute to former Iowa Congressman Neal Smith.

As I said yesterday, he was a true public servant, interested in doing right by his State rather than seeking self-aggrandizement. He was a real legislator, not a would-be pundit seeking the spotlight. These are attributes that make him a role model, and I feel lucky to have been mentored by him. When I was elected, I was the only Republican in the Iowa delegation. He didn't care that I was of a different party. He knew we both had our political views, but we were both there to represent the state we love. I will never forget his kindness in taking me under wing.

Neal Smith is a legend in Iowa, as evidenced by the fact that his name is attached to several Iowa institutions, including the Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge, which he was instrumental in establishing, the Neal Smith Trail, the Neal Smith Federal Building in Des Moines, which I helped to name after him with Senator Harkin, and the Neal and Bea Smith Law Center at their alma mater, Drake University.

His legislative legacy includes a long stint as a senior member of the Appropriations Committee.

Neal Smith was instrumental in creating Lake Red Rock, Saylorville Lake, and Lake Rathbun, which help protect Iowans from flooding, serve as reservoirs, and provide recreational opportunities for Iowans.

He also authored legislation to help small businesses after a disaster and legislation helping small businesses with federal government contracts.

Perhaps his most prominent legislative accomplishment was passing legislation combatting nepotism in the Federal Government.

Neal Smith served in World War II as a bomber pilot, was shot down, and received a Purple Heart, as well as other medals.